



# **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

Region 1  
490 N. Meridian Road  
Kalispell, MT 59901

**DECISION NOTICE  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for the  
NORTH SHORE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA  
PROPOSED ADDITION**

**December 9, 2015**

**Description of the Proposed Action**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase approximately 76.7 acres of farmland and wetlands located along the north shore of Flathead Lake about 4.5 miles east of the community of Somers. Funding for the project would be provided by Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act funding.

The primary purpose of the proposed land acquisition is to protect and manage this land to restore or improve natural riparian/wetland habitat, to continue annual crop production to benefit resident and migratory waterfowl, to improve and maintain habitat for other wildlife, and to provide opportunities for seasonal and compatible public recreation. Other benefits of this project include protecting ground water, surface water, and wetlands on or near Flathead Lake. This will help improve or maintain the high water quality of Flathead Lake for the benefit of aquatic life, and fish and wildlife habitat.

FWP proposes to incorporate this parcel into FWP's wildlife management area program, and it would become part of the existing North Shore Wildlife Management Area (North Shore WMA). The proposed Management Plan was included as part of the draft environmental assessment (EA).

**Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process and Public Involvement**

FWP released a draft EA and proposed Management Plan for public review on November 6, 2015, and asked for public comment through December 5, 2015. FWP held a public hearing in Somers on November 24, 2015, at 6:30 p.m. FWP ran legal ads describing the proposed project, the availability of the draft EA, and the public hearing information in four local newspapers. The draft EA and proposed Management Plan were posted on FWP's official website and were also available at the Region One headquarters in Kalispell and online for people with internet access or through internet service at public libraries.

The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternatives:

**Alternative A: Proposed Action - Acquisition of the Proposed North Shore WMA Property**

FWP would purchase the property using Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act funding and manage the property for the benefit of fish and wildlife values as a wildlife management area according to the draft Management Plan.

## Alternative B: No Action

The No-Action Alternative for this project is described as FWP not purchasing the 76-acre parcel. The landowner would likely sell the property with existing covenants, which allow subdivision into 20-acre parcels.

### **Summary of Public Comment**

FWP received a total of fourteen written comments during the 30-day public comment period. Twelve were in favor of the acquisition, one person had a management comment, and one expressed concerns about the acquisition. All comments were focused on the following issues:

1. One comment suggested that the current pheasant population is sparse on the north shore of Flathead Lake, and FWP should have a specific program to increase the number of birds, possibly by releasing pheasants to augment the existing population.

**FWP Response:** *FWP currently has a specific program to increase upland game birds on our WMAs. We accomplish this through habitat improvement – providing increased food and cover for birds and other wildlife species. The commenter suggested that there is already sufficient food and cover in this area, but FWP does not believe this is the case. This proposed acquisition is an open farm field that currently has almost no cover for pheasants or other wildlife species. We expect pheasant populations will naturally increase over time as we create a mosaic of habitat interspersed with a rotation farming plan to provide winter cover, nesting cover, and a more reliable food source. Releasing pen-raised birds would result in only a temporary increase in pheasant numbers as released birds experience up to 80% mortality within the first week; a long-term increase in the pheasant population will depend on improving habitat conditions.*

2. One comment asked that FWP should put more emphasis on Objective 2 in the draft Management Plan to maintain and increase habitat for upland game birds. The commenter also offered to help with implementing such projects.

**FWP Response:** *FWP intends to manage the north shore properties for all seven objectives outlined in the draft management plan. Objectives 1, 2, and 4 will all benefit upland game birds. In addition, other wildlife species are also a focus of this acquisition and would benefit from the proposed management actions, along with protection of groundwater resources. FWP believes that there will be an appropriate balance of habitat for upland game birds, waterfowl, and wetland-dependent species on the properties under our proposed management plan, and appreciated the offer to help with implementation.*

3. One comment indicated that the Pittman-Robertson Restoration Act funds must be used to benefit an identified species.

**FWP Response:** *The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act specifically states that activities eligible for funding include the ability to “acquire real property suitable or capable of being made suitable for: (i) wildlife habitat; or (ii) public access for hunting or other wildlife-oriented recreation” (§80.50). The Act does not specify that funding*

*must be used to benefit a specific species. Acquisition of this 76.7-acre property will provide increased public hunting opportunity and also provide additional wildlife habitat through protection from development and increased habitat through future restoration activities and continued farming of portions of the property as outlined in the draft EA.*

4. One comment expressed concern that crop production will only occur on the property for one additional year, and this will result in a reduction of food for wildlife and a negative impact on wildlife, which violates the intent of the Pittman-Robertson funding.

**FWP Response:** *The proposed management plan states under Objective 4 that FWP will use and manage the agricultural land in a manner that provides for a variety of wildlife habitats. Under the strategies to meet this objective, the management plan states that we will implement a farm plan to provide wildlife habitat such as winter and nesting cover and a relatively reliable food source. The current farm lease that is being accepted from the previous landowner will remain in place for the first year, but FWP intends to enter into a farm lease in the future to manage all three WMA properties in a manner that benefits wildlife while also protecting water quality and improving soil productivity, as we have for the previous three years. FWP will also restore native-like habitats (e.g., wetland, upland ponderosa pine forests) on the property as appropriate, which will benefit all wildlife along the north shore of Flathead Lake.*

5. One comment identified that this property cannot be managed unless funds are appropriated from the legislature.

**FWP Response:** *FWP receives license revenue through the Habitat Montana Program, as well as Pittman-Robertson funding that can be used to manage this property, but FWP acknowledges that these funds cannot be spent without legislative spending authority. Future management of the property will depend on continued support from hunters and from the legislature.*

6. One comment suggested that Flathead County would see increased tax revenue if this property were developed as residential property instead of conserved by FWP.

**FWP Response:** *Tax revenue would depend on the amount of development undertaken by any future landowner. Rural residential development or small subdivisions away from urban centers often cost more in county services (schools, law enforcement, etc.) than is realized through tax revenue. FWP cannot predict the extent of future development activities on this property and so possible costs and benefits to Flathead County are unknown.*

7. One comment expressed concern that FWP has closed fishing access sites (FAS) due to lack of funds and that many current sites are in need of maintenance, suggesting that FWP does not have the funds to manage existing properties, so should not consider acquiring new properties.

**FWP Response:** *FWP has not closed any FASs due to lack of funding. Some newly acquired FASs have experienced a lag time for improvement or maintenance due to FWP's funding cycles and needing to wait until the following fiscal year for legislative*

*approval for improvement/maintenance projects. Some FASs have experienced flooding or other natural disasters that temporarily closed the areas and created a need for maintenance, but FWP has quickly repaired and reopened all of these sites. A very limited number of sites are occasionally closed during the winter months to save money at times of low use, but are reopened in the spring.*

8. One comment suggested that current agricultural management of this property benefits wildlife, and unless FWP is going into the farming business, there is no benefit to the agency buying the property.

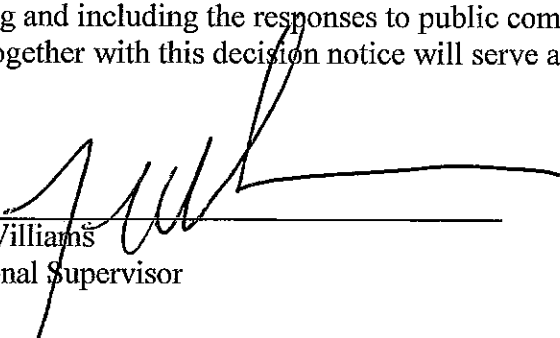
**FWP Response:** *Agriculture is the present land use for the property proposed for acquisition. The EA identified the importance of that resource to migratory waterfowl, and the management plan identifies a farm plan that provides wildlife benefits such as grain, winter cover, and nesting cover (page 34, Objective 4c). Based on historic development in Flathead County, there is a high likelihood that the land would be subdivided in the future, thereby eliminating or significantly reducing the amount of land being farmed for small grain production, and limiting the use of the land by wildlife. FWP intends to continue to lease portions of the property for farming activities to benefit wildlife and the local agricultural economy.*

#### **FWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision Recommendation**

In reviewing all the public comment and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the proposed purchase of the North Shore Wildlife Management Area addition.

Through the public review process described above, the public identified some important issues, but FWP found no significant impacts on the human or physical environments associated with this proposal; therefore, the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and an environmental impact statement is not required.

Noting and including the responses to public comments, the draft EA will become the Final EA and together with this decision notice will serve as the final documents for this proposal.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jim Williams  
Regional Supervisor

12/2/15  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date